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ABSTRACT

The Family Support Act (FSA) of 1988 provides opportunities for educators to form linkages with other agencies to strengthen families and help them move toward self-sufficiency. The FSA affords professionals chances to forge critical interagency connections and expand the range and capacity of programs for learners at risk. A strategy for forming effective linkages across agencies, particularly at the local level, has six steps. Step one involves assessing the need and climate for interagency partnerships. Unless a perceived need exists for interagency partnerships, they are unlikely to materialize. Step two involves getting started by formulating a tentative rationale, identifying existing linkages, and developing internal administrative support. Step three involves forming a team, identifying and selecting key players, and issuing the invitations. In step four, partners establish a collaborative relationship. The relationship implies organizations' willingness to change the way services are delivered. A plan is developed in step five that establishes joint goals and objectives as well as steps for achieving them. Developing an action plan involves creating an effective planning environment, formulating the plan, and developing administrative support for the plan. Step six, follow up and follow through, includes actions that can ensure the plan is accomplished. (NLA)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

Interagency Collaboration: Its Role in Welfare Reform

by Susan Imel

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The Family Support Act (FSA) of 1988 provides opportunities for educators to form linkages with other agencies to strengthen families and help them move toward self-sufficiency. The FSA clearly recognizes education as a central element in helping families avoid long-term dependence on public assistance and requires states to make educational services available to participants under the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) Training Program. Adult and vocational educators and employment and training personnel have an opportunity to be involved with human services staff in providing education and training programs to JOBS clients. Implementation of the FSA requires a commitment to provide access to regular and alternative schools for welfare recipients who do not have a high school diploma or its equivalent and to provide appropriate programs and services so that these students graduate from high school, earn their general equivalency diploma, or enter postsecondary education or training programs.

The FSA affords professionals chances to forge critical interagency connections and expand the range and capacity of programs for learners at risk. If adult and vocational educators, human service and employment and training personnel, and other professionals are to take advantage of these opportunities, they must begin forming linkages with each other in their local areas. This *ERIC Digest* describes a strategy for forming effective linkages across agencies, particularly at the local level.

For the Common Good: Developing Interagency Linkage Teams

Developing or strengthening interagency linkages is a systematic process consisting of a series of steps. Like most planning activities, it may not be feasible or desirable to follow the steps in a linear fashion but each step needs to be considered in the process of interagency linkage development.

Step One: Assessing the Need and Climate for Interagency Partnerships

Sometimes interagency linkages emerge spontaneously as a result of local conditions, but generally someone needs to take the lead in developing them. There are some problems that are best handled by a single agency, but there are many problems that an agency acting singly cannot solve (or cannot solve as effectively) (Bruner 1991). A favorable environment exists for the development of interagency linkages whenever there are problems or issues that require the attention of multiple agencies.

Unless a perceived need exists for interagency partnerships, they are unlikely to materialize. There may be circumstances in which a problem is not clearly recognized or in which potential partners are distracted by other concerns or have preexisting negative relationships. The time is right for collaborative efforts when the factors of human needs, public sentiment, legislative priorities, and institutional readiness converge (Melaville and Blank 1991).

In the absence of an optimal environment for linkages, the time may be used to begin or improve communication with potential partners as well as to work with other agencies on achieving internal objectives, waiting for a more opportune time to tackle broad-based joint problems (ibid.).

Step Two: Getting Started

Once it is determined that the environment will support the development of interagency partnerships, it is time to get started by formulating a tentative rationale, identifying existing linkages, and developing internal administrative support.

Formulating a tentative rationale begins by answering the question, "Why is there a need for a linkage team?" This information will be needed to help ensure internal agency support as well as market the team idea in the community. The assessment of the situation in Step One can form the basis for the answer to this question since it should include a statement of key problems and issues that are better addressed by multiple agencies as well as a list of who the key players might be.

Frequently, developing a team may simply be a matter of formalizing already existing linkages by creating a structure to approach problem solutions in a more systematic way. Even if existing linkages and networks will not form the nucleus of a team, they may still be a good way to get started.

In order to generate internal administrative support for an interagency linkage team, the tentative rationale should clearly enumerate the organizational benefits of interagency linkages. For example, what could an interagency team accomplish that could not be realized by an organization on its own and how would these achievements contribute to the organization's mission or goals? Ensuring internal support should be a continuous process that includes keeping administrators informed of progress and reporting on successes that have a positive effect on the organization and its clients.

Step Three: Forming the Team

The work in formulating a tentative rationale and identifying existing linkages will provide the foundation for the step of forming the team. Activities in this step include identifying and selecting key players and issuing the invitations.

A crucial aspect of selecting which organizations should be represented on the team is identifying those that will have a stake in solving the problems or issues described in the tentative rationale. These are the groups most likely to have an interest in working toward joint solutions, especially if preestablished working relationships exist. Considering who should actually represent the organization on the team is also important. Experience has demonstrated that team members should be in decision-making positions within their agencies. To a great extent, individual members' power and position will determine whether the team will have the necessary authority to modify how things are done or negotiate policy changes (Melaville and Blank 1991).

Ideally, whoever is taking the initiative to organize the linkage team should issue the invitation to join, and it is probably best to direct it to the heads of the agencies identified for the team. Stressing the benefits to the organization of being involved in this type of activity can help offset fears agencies may have about extending already stretched resources. Beginning with the agency head will help ensure internal support for the team and its activities and may also secure the type of representation needed, i.e., an individual in a decision-making position.

Step Four: Establishing a Collaborative Relationship

Although described as a separate step, establishing and maintaining a collaborative relationship is an ongoing process. Collaboration implies a willingness on the part of organizations to change the way services are delivered by–

- jointly developing and agreeing to a set of common goals and directions;
- sharing responsibility for obtaining those goals; and
- working together to achieve those goals, using the expertise of each collaborator (Bruner 1991, p. 6)

Initially, partners may not be ready for a collaborative relationship. Instead, they may work together cooperatively to help each other meet their respective organizational goals. However, unless these cooperative relationships become increasingly collaborative in nature, no changes will occur in the service delivery system (Melaville and Blank 1991).

A number of factors contribute to collaborative linkages: regular contact through meetings, frequent communication through telephone calls and mail, a client-centered focus, leadership that helps develop and maintain a shared vision, a plan that delineates shared goals and objectives, and appropriate agency representation on the team to execute the plan (Imel and Sandoval 1990).

Step Five: Developing a Plan

A plan that establishes joint goals and objectives as well as steps for achieving them is at the heart of a successful interagency linkage team. Time spent on developing a plan will pay dividends later because it will provide a framework for guiding the efforts of the team. Developing a plan involves creating an effective planning environment, formulating the plan, and developing administrative support for the plan.

The communication and problem-solving process used to establish goals and objectives, agree on roles, make decisions, and resolve conflicts is a crucial variable in creating and sustaining interagency linkages (Melaville and Blank 1991). An effective planning environment is one in which team members can communicate honestly and in which they are freed from the distractions of their daily routines.

A plan for the team's work should contain goals and objectives, specific activities to achieve them, designated responsibilities (who will do what), and timelines for completion of activities. It is important that those involved reach consensus on the plan's content. Otherwise it many not receive full support from all team members (and hence all agencies represented). After the plan is developed and finalized, it needs to be shared with the respective agencies involved in the team, and team members should be prepared to point out how the plan will help their agency achieve its mission more effectively and efficiently. It may be beneficial to share the plan with the wider community in order to generate broad-based community support for the team's work.

Step Six: Follow Up and Follow Through

Achieving interagency consensus on a written action plan is an important accomplishment, but the plan must also be implemented and the team's continuing work must be maintained. Actions that can ensure the plan is accomplished include holding regular meetings, requesting progress reports, using task forces or committees to carry out the team's work, using the plan timelines as a guide, and creating an advisory committee of community representatives.

Even though members may have a shared vision for their work as a team, they may have trouble maintaining the initial energy that mobilized the team. Some strategies for sustaining the team's momentum include rotating the leadership role, sharing success stories, updating the action plan on a regular basis, and expanding or changing the membership on the team. Some common pitfalls to avoid include the following (Guthrie and Guthrie 1991):

- **NATO or No action, talk only.** Use the plan to keep meetings on track, ensuring that the work of the team proceeds.
- **Equating information with knowledge.** Take time to absorb information before taking action.
- **Use of excessive jargon.** In the spirit of collaboration, speak in terms that all partners can understand.

Conclusion

In Ohio, the process described in this *Digest* has been used to develop local interagency linkage teams. Examples of team activities include the following: (1) development of a computerized common intake system used throughout the county by human services, adult basic and vocational education, and JTPA–developed with funding from a number of grant sources, this system eliminates the need for clients to complete intake forms at each agency; (2) development and implementation of a new long-term medical assistant program in which 12 of the 23 participants are human services clients; and (3) stimulation of the development of a bill in the Ohio Legislature calling for a change in age restrictions of current state school bus regulations.

It takes time and effort to develop and foster interagency linkages. In addition, it requires commitment on the part of those organizations involved to devote resources to the effort. Authentic collaborative efforts evolve over a period of time, frequently after a period in which those involved get to know one another and develop the level of trust needed to engage in joint planning.

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This Digest is based on Imel, S. *For the Common Good: A Guide for Developing Local Interagency Linkage Teams.* Columbus: Center on Education and Training for Employment, The Ohio State University, 1992.

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